

# **The Beren Writing Center Handbook**

Updated spring 2012

**This handbook is always a working draft, as the Writing Center welcomes tutor contributions to it. The Writing Center would like to include any of your thoughts on tutoring, advice for new tutors, or valuable experiences.**

**Parts of this handbook have been adapted from the Princeton University's Writing Center Handbook.**

## **Writing Center Mission Statement**

The Beren Writing Center believes that the best writing comes from a writer's engagement with other writers. We provide a supportive environment where students can develop their writing and thinking skills in concert with the responses of their peers. The Writing Center's peer tutors serve as active readers, asking questions, following up implications, and reflecting their impressions of the paper to the student. Tutors help students hone their ideas for various writing projects, from academic papers to personal statements. Whether student writers are brainstorming a thesis or revising a draft, our tutors help students develop an effective, systematic approach to the writing process.

## **Writing Center Philosophy**

We believe that writing and thinking evolves through a process of sharing and dialogue among students and mentors. The Writing Center is a place to foster this kind of dialogue, pairing experienced mentors, in the form of tutors, with student writers struggling to understand their audience, assignment, or their own writing process.

The first goal of tutors should be to engage students in discussions to help them discover their own best writing. We believe that writers reach a greater depth and breadth of understanding of a topic when they engage in an informed dialogue with a colleague or peer. Asking questions, sharing ideas, considering responses, re-evaluating our own assumptions, and revising are the central tools of an effective dialogue about writing.

A writing tutors tries to address the specific needs of the individual student while supporting the student in her growth as a writer. Our focus is not on perfecting individual assignments, but on fostering and modeling the process of discussion, drafting, and revision that helps students become stronger, more independent writers. Tutors play many roles in a tutoring session—we listen, respond, ask questions, engage ideas, offer feedback, suggest resources, model skills, identify patterns, and more.

The Beren Writing Center should serve a central role for the campus' writing community, providing a safe, respectful, responsive environment in which writers of all levels can come together and talk to each other about their writing. By helping students become stronger, more independent writers, the Writing Center engages students in their learning, develops their understanding of their own ideas and writing processes, and nurtures skills on which students will rely throughout their lives.

## **Tutoring Logistics**

All appointments in the Writing Center are an hour long, and all students are limited to two appointments per week. Tutoring options for our students include as-needed appointments, weekly appointments, and bi-weekly appointments.

- **As-needed appointments:** Most clients of the Beren Writing Center will schedule a one-time appointment addressed towards a specific assignment. You will have to assess the student's needs relatively quickly. Students who make as-

needed appointments often have writing projects due in a very short time, so they will want you to focus intensely on their work. It is imperative that you explain to the student that we don't proofread their papers; rather, our goal is to help students prioritize what their needs are in an effort to help them reach the next stage in their writing process.

- **Weekly appointments:** Only students in English Composition are entitled to schedule regular weekly appointments and must do so by speaking to one of the Writing Center's administrators. These students meet with the same tutor every week. Students benefit from meeting with the same tutor for several sessions. When working with regular appointments, you will get to know your students well. You can make plans with them for what you'd like to accomplish in individual sessions, but you should also establish some long-term goals with these students. What would the student like to learn from the Writing Center? What patterns of error do you want to help the student identify in her own work? How can you help the student to learn to organize, plan, revise effectively? One of your goals with students who want regular appointments should be to minimize the student's reliance on you. This can be encouraged by occasionally asking the student how she feels her writing has changed since she started working with you.
- **Bi-weekly appointments:** Students who use the Writing Center often and wish to make working with a tutor a regular part of their writing process may request a bi-weekly appointment. Any student who is NOT in English Composition may request a bi-weekly appointment at the same time, with the same tutor, EVERY OTHER week and should speak to one of the Writing Center's administrators to arrange scheduling.
- **Restrictions:** If a student with a regular appointment misses two sessions, her regular appointment slot will be cancelled. (An exception will be made if the cancellations are excused due to illness or emergency.) A student who loses her weekly time slot due to missed appointments can still make drop-in appointments. Although we do not keep hand-written waiting lists for appointments, our online scheduling system can notify students of opening in the schedule. There is a running line at the bottom of each day on our online schedule that reads. "Sign up to be notified of an opening in the schedule!" Once clicking on this link, the student will be prompted to enter her email address and the system will email her when an opening arising in the schedule. A student can sign up for the waiting list as often as she likes.

## Hours and Scheduling

The Writing Center is open 9-6, Monday through Thursday. We sometimes offer appointments on Friday or Sunday mornings, depending on tutor availability.

At the beginning of each semester, we will ask you to email all the times you are available to work. We'll also ask you the maximum hours you'd like to work each week. Be aware that tutors are required to work a minimum of 2 tutoring hours per week; for each tutoring hour you work, you should also add a 15-minute increment of time after your tutoring hour for administrative and reflective practices (see "Administrative

Practices” below). This means that, when considering how many hours you want to tutor, plan to be in the Writing Center for an hour and fifteen minutes per tutoring session.

When you are planning your schedule, plan for the worst week of the semester. Think about how much you will want to work during midterms and exams. It is not acceptable to miss your shifts because of school obligations, so be prepared to work whatever shifts you schedule unless you are sick or have an emergency.

### **Scheduling an Appointment**

You should be very familiar with our online schedule, as you will often be asked to help students create their own accounts so they can schedule their own appointments. If a student has never accessed our schedule before, take a moment to help her create a new account by adhering to the following directions. Access the online system through the link on our homepage at [www.yu.edu/writing-centers/beren](http://www.yu.edu/writing-centers/beren) or directly at [www.rich75.com/yu/index.php](http://www.rich75.com/yu/index.php). Direct the student to click on the option, “**click here**,” in the phrase, “If this is your first visit, **click here** to register for an account.” She must then fill in all fields on the new user registration page. If, in the rare case, you are creating an account for a student, you may assign her the default password, “writingcenter,” and inform the student that she should change it at her leisure. Once the student has an account, explain that she can schedule appointments by clicking on an available slot and completing all fields in the appointment scheduling window that will open in the browser. Remember, all sessions are an hour long sessions, as we’ve found that this is the optimum amount of time to support students. In an effort to support as many clients as possible, students are allowed a maximum of two appointments per week. If you want to schedule an appointment for a student already logged onto the system, you can log in to your own account, which has you listed as an administrator, and you can insert the student’s name at an available slot.

### **Staff Meetings and Professional Development**

Part of your responsibility as a tutor is to attend staff meetings. Staff meetings offer all of us the opportunity to become better tutors by reflecting on our work and learning from the experiences of other tutors. Staff meetings also afford us extended time and space to consider writing center scholarship. We typically have 5-6 staff meetings per semester, which are most often held during club hour (Wednesdays, 2:40-3:35pm). We occasionally co-ordinate alternate meeting times so that tutors who cannot attend club hours sessions can be part of this process. To diversify our training schedule, we have one Sunday staff meeting per semester, the Fall Orientation and the Spring Practicum. Another exciting opportunity for professional development is our collaboration with the Wilf Campus Writing Center. We typically organize 1-2 events with the Wilf tutors per year. As part of your commitment to the Beren Writing Center community, tutors can only miss 2 staff meetings in any given semester!.

## **Administrative practices**

### **Working a Shift**

When you arrive in the Writing Center, check the online schedule at [www.yu.edu/writing-centers/beren](http://www.yu.edu/writing-centers/beren) to see if you have new appointments. If you don't have any scheduled appointments, you might be asked to do administrative work—preparation of materials for training, help with advertising, planning for meetings, scheduling appointments, answering the phone, etc.

If you have an appointment with a student, and she does not arrive within 5 minutes of the session, you should access her appointment details online and call her at the number she's provided. If a student does not arrive after ten minutes, she is considered a no-show and we mark her appointment as missed in the schedule. Keep in mind that after a student is a no-show twice, she will no longer be able to make any appointments for the remainder of the semester.

If you have an appointment and your student does arrive, you will ask her to complete an anonymous post-session evaluation form at the end of your session and leave the form in the suggestions folder on the wall outside the Writing Center. Reassure the student that her feedback is confidential and that it helps the writing center function better.

Another important task at the end of each appointment is to complete a "Client Report Form" online (see "Client Report Forms" below). To complete a client report form, click on the appointment slot. A new window that contains the scheduling details of your appointment should open in your browser. In the new window you will see a section labeled "Administrator Only." This section gives you the option to check a box if the appointment is missed or to add or review a client report form. To add a client report form for a completed session, click on the link that reads "Add New."

You are responsible for keeping track of all of your hours worked, whether for tutoring, training, or just covering the Center. After a shift ends or after a staff meeting, you will record your hours online at [yu.edu/kronos](http://yu.edu/kronos). You will also keep a hard copy of your hours in your personal binder that is on the top shelf of the bookcase in the BWC. For each pay period, you will keep track of your Writing Center hours in the Monthly Time Report form in your binder.

### **Client Report Forms**

In your client report form, you should report what specific writing situation you and the student chose to address, what was accomplished in the session, and what you feel is most important to work on in the future. Your session report should record whatever details of a session you think are most illuminating and should also reflect what you think the student learned, what you may have learned about writing or tutoring, and what kinds of questions the session raised for you.

Client report forms are used to assess students who have visited the Writing Center to figure out what approach the next tutor might take. You should feel free to explore your students' past reports. Client report forms also help us understand how students use the Writing Center and how we can better facilitate student writing. Tutors often find that client report forms are useful tools for reflecting after a session and evaluating their own efficacy as a tutor in that session. They often find that it helps them define the session's strengths and helps them focus on ways to improve in the future.

Part of the 15-minutes of administrative time after each session is intended to pay you for the time and mental space needed to write you client reports after each session. The client report form is a useful first opportunity to try to articulate your experience, but not the only outlet. You might also find it helpful to speak with Andrea, Lauren, Dr. Ladin or another tutor in the Center after a session, in addition to completing your client report.

Client report forms must remain confidential within the Writing Center. While tutors and Writing Center administrators have access to them, they are not available to anyone outside the Writing Center.

### **Professionalism**

The relationship of a tutor to a student can seem a bit ambiguous, in part because you are students as well as tutors. In addition, a tutor's professional role is a friendly one—helping, supporting, and encouraging. When you are working in the Writing Center, you must keep your relationship with students professional at all times. It is important to keep a bit of distance between your student clients and yourself to avoid any situation in which there might be even the appearance of impropriety. If you need to contact a student because she is late for or continually misses appointments, do so using the Writing Center telephone or ask Andrea to send the student an email. We do not meet with students for tutoring outside of our scheduled Writing Center hours, and we never write papers for our students.

Also, writing tutors must avoid evaluating student writing, either positively or negatively. Avoid suggesting what grade you think the student will deserve or making overall judgments about the quality of the work. It is the teacher's job to evaluate the student's writing, and writing tutors do not want to interfere with the teaching process. It is acceptable to acknowledge and describe specific areas of improvement (e.g. "Your thesis is much more specific than it was before our discussion."), but it is not acceptable to offer overall evaluations (e.g. "This paper is excellent").

While we all have emergencies, it is important to remember that your work in the Writing Center is your job. Please only miss work because you are ill or have other emergency circumstances. Studying for midterms, dinner with friends, or meetings with your professors do not qualify as acceptable reasons to miss work. If you miss work due to illness or emergency, please call the Beren Writing Center at 917-326-4981 (put this number in your cell phone now!) AND email Andrea at [efthymio@yu.edu](mailto:efthymio@yu.edu) the moment you know you will miss work.

## Typical Conference Scenarios

### Draft Conferences

The majority of students we see at the Writing Center come with drafts. Most come wanting the tutor to “see if a paper flows” and tell them what needs to be done to improve it. It is important for the tutor to resist simply showing the student where the paper needs work.

Many tutors like to have students briefly describe what they have written before actually reading any of the draft. Doing so gets students talking about their writing, and when they talk about their papers, students who just want their papers “fixed” often discover for themselves where the paper’s problems are. In addition, there can be a discrepancy—sometimes a huge one—between what the student *thinks* she has written and what she has *actually* written. Many students are more articulate about their ideas when they speak than on the written page, and therefore a quick interview can frequently tell you what the student really wanted to say. The tutor, working as a mirror, can also point out problem areas she hears in a student’s description by saying, for example: “It sounds to me like you haven’t found a clear focus yet. Can you tell me exactly what your thesis is or point it out in your paper?”

The “Basic Guidelines to Conferences on Drafts” outlines some useful strategies for getting students involved in reading the draft. One not mentioned there, however, is reading the paper out loud to the student, or having the student read it out loud to you. Students can often hear problems in their writing that they cannot see. Occasionally, a useful outcome of the student reading aloud is a discrepancy between what she says and what she has written. Often, the way the student reads the paper is how she intended to write it.

Time permitting, it is preferred to have the student read the entire draft to you before offering any suggestions or comments. If the student finds errors herself that she wants to correct, allow her to do so as she reads, and refrain from offering corrections or suggestions while the student is reading. If the draft is very long and you are concerned that you may not have time to hear the entire essay read aloud, you may ask the student to read aloud the introduction, summarize her main points, and read aloud her conclusion. Additionally, at the beginning of the session, you may ask the student’s permission to make notations on her draft of important passages to which to return later. Asking permission is important to the Writing Center dynamic because it allows the writer to maintain ownership of her writing. She is allowing you to engage in this process with her, and by asking permission, you reassure her that you are not commandeering her work.

At times, it is not possible to read an entire paper before commenting. If presented with a long paper, you may choose to begin by examining the thesis paragraph, usually the first paragraph of an essay. You may want to have the student identify the thesis, and then ask her to summarize the body to examine whether her thesis is, in fact, what she is contending in her paper.

After the student has read her draft, begin your discussion with global writing issues—the thesis, the organization, the supporting arguments, etc.

When working on drafts, it can be easy to feel that so much time is spent working on thesis or structure that you are overlooking sentence-level problems. After working on a global issue, you may find it easy to link what appears to be a sentence level problem—say passive voice or run-ons—to more global issues. Students who overuse passive voice are often trying to hide from argument; those with run-ons may not have a sense of the borders between their ideas, which can be evident on the level of argument and organization, as well as the sentence. In such cases, you can make a point about global problems by using local examples.

No matter how experienced you become, however, you will still have occasional frustrating sessions, and you should be aware that most tutors feel strongly that last-minute visits are among the least successful sessions they have with students, simply because a paper due the next day (or that afternoon!) cannot be significantly revised after the conference. Be frank with students—who may be a bit panicked—about what they can realistically revise within their time-frames: “If your paper’s due first thing tomorrow, you won’t have time to make the organizational changes that would really improve your draft. Let’s see what we can do about clarifying your thesis this afternoon.” Let students know that they can receive more help, and perhaps more useful advice, if they come in at an earlier stage of the writing process the next time, and that they can return with revised drafts if they have time (and if an appointment is available) before the final paper is due. Certainly, the student who arrives with a draft and plenty of time to do significant revision should be congratulated on her foresight and energy.

### **Writing Assignment Problems**

As mentioned earlier, students arrive at the Writing Center at various points in the writing process. Whenever a student visits the Writing Center, even to discuss a graded paper, it is useful to ask early in the conference what the assignment is or was. It is not uncommon for a host of big writing problems to be caused or aggravated by a student’s not understanding the writing assignment. If a student does not recognize that she is being asked to write a compare and contrast analysis, a description, a critique, or a review, she is not likely to write effectively for that assignment.

It is generally a good idea to ask the student to describe the writing assignment and to explain to you what the assignment involves. In the process of explaining the assignment, the student is likely to realize what (if anything) she does not understand about the assignment. For instance, she may not know certain terms, or what exactly the instructor means by “be specific,” “literary analysis,” “clear thesis,” “reasoned defense,” or “coherent argument.” A discussion of what the student is being asked to do can lead easily into a conversation about how the student might begin to think about answering the question posed by the assignment, where she wants the essay to go, or what material will be crucial to her argument. If she has brought in a full draft, such a discussion can point out how she could best revise what she has already written.

It is possible that you and the student may discover that the assignment itself is unclear. If you think you can help the student make sense of an assignment, do so, but if you are unclear about what the assignment calls for, encourage the student to check with her instructor about what is wanted. In these cases, you should help the student formulate questions about specific points of confusion. It is also important that you not appear critical of the instructor. For instance, you might observe, “It is not clear to me whether you must answer all these questions or if these are only suggested points you might want to take up. Why don’t you ask your instructor?” You can then discuss several ways of working on the assignment, anticipating different ways the assignment might be clarified by the instructor. Never critique an instructor or his or her assignment to the student. If the student is particularly frustrated with an instructor, it may be healthy to allow her to vent a bit, but avoid participating in a “teacher bashing” session.

If you come across assignments that are either poorly or very well prepared, ask the student if you may make a copy of the assignment. Such sample assignment sheets are useful for writing instructors and tutors to review in workshops or staff meetings.

Here are some questions to consider when you are dealing with writing assignments:

1. What is the assignment/topic? What is the student being asked to do?
2. What is the purpose of the assignment? Why is the student being asked to do it?
3. How does this assignment fit into the context of the course? Is the student expected to use the course content and materials? How? Should she use outside sources? If so, what kind?
4. What skills or procedures does the student need to produce her writing?
5. What kind of text is she expected to produce? A summary? Position paper? Literary analysis? Short story? Lab report?
6. Can the student find a model of a successful response to this type of assignment?
7. How long should the text be?
8. What are the deadlines for writing the various drafts of the text?
9. Where can the student get feedback? Will there be time for peer review? Does the teacher want to see a draft for comments?

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### **Talking about Ideas: Getting Started, Finding a Focus**

Many students we see at the Writing Center come in wanting to talk about their topics because they cannot get started, cannot find anything to say, or they are drowning in a flood of ideas. These cases require close listening by the tutor, because the tutor needs to report to the student what the student is not able to see or hear herself: insights, sparks of

excitement, curiosity, points of connection and coherency, emerging trains of thought, or the bones of an argument.

You may be able to draw out a student's ideas on a given essay topic or paper assignment by asking her what she found interesting in the readings or assignment, or what bores her, confuses her, or in any way stands out. It is not unusual for a student who believes she has nothing to say to reply to these questions in a glum or cranky manner; however, once she begins to feel that her responses are legitimate, that she does have a way into the topic or reading, ideas are likely to come spilling out. As a sounding board, you need to point out the ideas that the student articulates and any patterns the ideas may even tentatively form. Questions you put to her can lead the student to sift out and focus what will eventually become the essay's main ideas.

During conferences in which a student talks through her ideas, you may want to stop every few minutes and prompt her to take notes. Sometimes it will be easier and more productive for you to take some notes, either to get started or to supplement what the student writes down, but, as much as possible, keep the pen in the hand of the student. The student should be in charge of generating and recording the discoveries of the session.

It may be, however, that a student is so anxious about having nothing to say that she needs to do more than just talk to generate ideas. There are a number of techniques for getting started that you can suggest the student try right there with you: mapping, brainstorming, and various forms of freewriting.

Mapping is creating a visual chart of one's ideas. Brainstorming is an unstructured exploration of a topic, and freewriting is unedited, loose writing for a set period of time, often 5 or 10 minutes, without stopping. Exercises like these can help a student discover what interests her by bypassing final draft mode and generating rough ideas that can then be shaped. These same techniques can also help a student develop her ideas once the paper is underway or a draft is written.

The above pre-draft exercises can also help the student who has too much to say eliminate some ideas and focus and refine others. Written exercises like mapping, for instance, provide the student a picture or diagram of the points she is most interested in and those that lead away from or interfere with what she really wants to say. Such exercises help a student explore relationships between ideas, point to ways of ordering an argument or analysis, and show the student writer what she has not yet said or accounted for.

In talking with students about essay or paper ideas before they have begun to write, you are helping them recognize what they may only intuit, work out hunches, trace interesting leads, rearrange what they do know, and raise chains of questions to answer. Tutors often find these sessions exhilarating, but they can also be a bit bewildering. Sometimes a student experiences the "light bulb effect" and leaves the Writing Center clearly feeling confident and ready to write; other times, especially with more reticent students, the

session may seem to have accomplished relatively little, perhaps only a trickle of ideas. Though less dramatic, this achievement can be as important as the “light bulb effect” because the student leaves feeling at last enabled to write, and may have learned something valuable about the early stages of the writing process. Unless that student returns to work with you again, however, it is difficult for the tutor of an “ideas conference” to know the quality of the final paper or essay.

### **Conferences on Notes**

Students writing research papers sometimes come to the Writing Center looking for ways to turn a mound of data or a mountain of note-cards into a paper. Many of the students we see working on their senior theses visit the Writing Center at this stage in the writing process, and you can encourage them to sign up with a regular tutor if they haven’t already done so. These students generally need help organizing and focusing their material, and discovering what it is they want to say about all the information they’ve amassed. A good place to begin with such a conference is to encourage the student to articulate what her research is about, what she wants her paper to accomplish, and what ideas she has for her thesis.

For the student who has become engrossed in collecting data, reading, and note-taking, the chance to set those materials aside and talk about what interests her in her topic, her findings, and her reactions to her readings, allows her to enter her subject area’s scholarly dialogue. It is common for students to feel overwhelmed and silenced by what they have been reading and researching, so part of your goal is to help the student find her voice and what she has to say about all that she has learned. Additionally, you are helping the student find a specific thesis and an argument for her paper. It is a good idea to remind the student that the role of secondary material is to support a thesis. Secondary material that does not relate to, support, or complicate a thesis often does not belong in the text of a paper. Following some discussion with you, a variety of pre-draft writing exercises can help the student begin to synthesize ideas, sketch out and organize an argument, determine what material is not relevant, and decide where she needs to gather more information. In some cases, just the act of writing what she thinks about her topic in a free-writing exercise can enable the student to feel in control of her research material and ready to work through what she wants to say and the best way to present her ideas.

You will also see students who feel unready to begin writing from their notes, either because they do not understand their assignment or because they feel unsure about how to incorporate their secondary reading and research into a paper. In both cases, a clear sense of the assignment, including the role of researched material in the final paper, will help the student understand how to turn notes into a draft. Especially if a student has done little or no significant research paper writing in high school, a discussion with you about the purposes of such papers in general, and her assignment in particular, as well as the logistics of research writing can go far in enabling a student to write thoughtfully and confidently.

## Conferences on Graded Papers

Students do not often bring graded papers to the Writing Center, but when they do it is generally because they have not been able to understand an instructor's comments. Please begin by encouraging the student to talk over her paper, or perhaps, a draft of her next paper, with her professor. You can help a student a lot by preparing her to have an articulate discussion about her writing with an instructor.

If the student is still interested in your comments, consider your task to interpret, and thereby clarify, the professor's comments. You might begin by asking about the assignment from the student. It can also be useful to ask the student how well she thought she had done on the paper when she handed it in—were there parts that she felt uneasy about? You may also want to inquire about how she actually wrote the paper. These sorts of questions will help the student become more aware of her own writing process, and lead to her hearing from you other strategies for producing her next paper.

Tutors generally have a fairly easy time understanding comments on a graded paper, and largely find they only have to elaborate on an abbreviated remark (i.e. “awk.,” “unconvincing,” “evidence needed,” “sequence probs.”). What we strive for here is to teach the student to understand these comments so that she can spot these problems in subsequent papers. As in a draft conference, you may also want to negotiate with the student to focus on one of the important or recurring problems and to discuss how to avoid this problem in future papers.

Sometimes, but not very often, a student comes to the Writing Center with a graded paper because she thinks she has been unfairly graded. Even if you agree that a grade is particularly harsh, nothing will be gained by siding with the student in complaints against the instructor. Instead, you might say something like, “yes, I can see that you feel a ‘D’ is a low grade; you ought to discuss the paper with your professor so that you can find out more specifically what her concerns are with what you’ve written. She’ll be in the best position to let you know what she expects in your next papers. If you’re still uncertain about her criticism after you meet with her, feel free to come back and discuss with me the feedback she gave you.” Most often, when a student is upset about a graded paper, a misunderstanding between the student and the instructor—about the assignment, about grading criteria, etc.—has occurred. If you truly think that a paper has been evaluated unfairly, or that an instructor's comments are abrasive or belittling, you may ask if you can make a copy of the paper and comments (if you can do so without alarming the student) and then talk with Dr. Ladin or Andrea about the problem.

Usually, if the student can stop obsessing about the grade received, all sorts of fruitful writing issues can be discussed by the two of you: issues of audience, argument, and organization, and strategies for approaching the next paper.

## **Tutoring Restrictions**

Tutors can coach a student about problems with grammar and style and teach proofreading techniques, but should not proofread student papers. If a student requests proofreading, see if you can get the student to explain what she means by the term. Students frequently use the word “proofreading” when they really want a more substantive response. In that case, you can have a regular tutoring session. If, in fact, the student wanted you to copyedit the paper, you can explain that you would be happy to teach proofreading techniques, but that you will not be able to proofread the essay yourself. You can also explain that learning to proofread independently is a valuable skill, with benefits far beyond the present paper. Although students will sometimes express confusion or disappointment about this restriction, in fact many good sessions begin with a negotiation like this one.

## **Bringing a Conference to an End**

Please pay attention to time during the middle of the conference. If at all possible, it is valuable to find a stopping place with ten minutes left so that you and the student can recap what you’ve done and plan the student’s subsequent revision work. It is often worthwhile to ask the student to begin this summary, perhaps by asking her to write for a few minutes what she has figured out and what she has left to do. If her recap concludes with a few minutes still to go, you then have time to emphasize or reinforce the parts you feel are most pressing. Before you conclude the conference, ask the student to write down the next three steps in a revision plan. A student may have wonderful ideas in conference, but be unable to remember them in a few hours; if there’s a written record of the suggestions you worked out together, the student will be much more likely to be able to revise successfully on her own.

While it is sometimes hard to squeeze this into an hour-long session, students often tell us that unless they leave their conference with a written agenda, they cannot remember what they had planned to do when they return to work on their papers alone. Summing up the conference can also give shape to a session that might otherwise seem amorphous to a student, and thus show her the significance of what she has accomplished with you. This exercise can also help you to get a head start figuring out what you want to put in your conference report. As you close the conference, it is also a good idea to send the student off with praise for what she has done well and reassurance about her ability to finish her paper or revise and improve her draft. If appropriate, you might also want to remind her that she can make an appointment to meet with a tutor again.

Before the student leaves, also ask her to take a minute to fill out a post-session evaluation. Not only are the evaluations necessary in compiling our client satisfaction statistics at the end of the semester, but they give the Writing Center a sense of what we can do to improve. Also, students often rave about their tutors, which we can then pass on to you!

## Basic Guidelines for Conferences on Drafts

### 1. Gather information (5 minutes)

Before setting an agenda, you need to get some basic information.

- **the assignment**
- **any comments the student has received from her teacher**
- **the amount of time the student can devote to revision**

### 2. Negotiate an agenda (5 minutes)

In order to read the text in ways most useful to the writer, you need to **narrow the range of possible help to two or three most likely issues**. Ask the student what he or she wants you to read for, keeping in mind that it's best to work first on global or higher order issues, then on more local problems. As the conference proceeds, you will renegotiate this agenda as other issues arise, keeping the student's concerns in mind and also teaching him or her how to talk about writing and the writing process.

### 3. Assess the text (5-15 minutes)

As you begin to assess the essay, **involve the student in the process**, perhaps by asking her to read the essay aloud, or to read another copy and mark it, focusing on the issues you've put on your agenda. You might, for instance, ask a student to identify sentences of argument and begin to work with those that are unclear or need development, or you might ask the student to sum up the main point of each paragraph in a sentence in the margin. Involving the student will make the time you spend more productive for her.

As you read, honor the preliminary agenda for at least the first page or so. You may spot unsought problems immediately; file these away for a few minutes (perhaps by making a dot in the margin) and concentrate on what you've agreed to look for. When you have a sense of the text, you can **either start with the previously identified issue or renegotiate the agenda**. Working on the writers' global concerns is almost always more important than trying to improve every aspect of the paper. Keep in mind that the goal is not to "fix" every aspect of a student's paper; rather, the writer will benefit the most by being able to understand a few elements of her writing that she can improve and a few moments where she has communicated successfully.

### 4. Work together on the text (20-25 minutes)

In 25 minutes you may only be able to work on two kinds of problems in an essay – thesis and structure, citation and reflection on evidence, transitions and orienting the reader, etc. **This section of the conference must be interactive**; help the writer see problems, but prompt him or her to imagine solutions. When you give examples or model more fruitful approaches, prompt the writer to try rewriting this passage or the next one like it. Try to ensure that you are not doing all the talking and that the student is doing some writing.

### 5. Plan the student's further revision (5-10 minutes)

Planning further revision is sometimes difficult to save time for, but it is very often essential to a successful conference. All writers need more revision than is possible during a single conference. Helping them plan this continued work is often the best assistance a tutor can give. Monitor Step 4 carefully so that you can stop the writer after 45 minutes of the conference and have him or her start writing a plan for further revision. Make a list together of the next three things the student will do in revising the paper; in some cases, you may also include advice about longer-term issues the student can work on in his or her writing.

## A Guide to Quick Diagnosis

Experienced writing teachers are often able to diagnose problems in a student's essay very quickly. While that may seem like magic, in fact, they've internalized a scale of concerns that begins with the global and moves toward the local, and they know students need to begin to revise by addressing global problems first. The most global concern is **thesis**; after that comes **structure**, then **evidence**, and finally **style**.

Experienced writing teachers and tutors also know that student essays often have predictable patterns of problems. The following chart, adapted from Kerry Walk's "Types of Problematic Papers," outlines a few types of problematic essays, most of which have trouble with the thesis. Keep these types of essays in mind while reading student drafts. One of the lessons you'll learn from this chart is not to worry if most of your conferences focus on thesis. That's the most important global element of the essay, and the point at which most revision should begin.

<b>Paper Type</b>	<b>Symptoms</b>	<b>Diagnosis</b>	<b>Tutoring Prompt</b>
<b>The Museum Tour a.k.a. The Laundry List</b>	Lists reasons, components, proofs, or examples rather than exploring a question or developing an argument.	The apparent problem is a predictable <i>structure</i> ; the actual problem is a descriptive rather than argumentative <i>thesis</i> .	Ask the writer to pose a provocative question and posit a good answer about one coherent issue or theme.
<b>The Confusing Paper</b>	Typically the product of a student writer who doesn't know either how to develop a thesis that drives a paper's structure or how to organize ideas.	The apparent problem is an unpredictable <i>structure</i> ; the actual problem may have to do with <i>thesis</i> .	If the paper lacks an arguable central claim, work with the writer to develop a better one. If the paper has such a claim, work with the writer to develop a logical argument to support it.
<b>The Unpersuasive Paper</b>	Falls into two main types, in which (1) the claims are based on a misreading or preconception; (2) the claims are sound but unsubstantiated; any evidence is insufficiently analyzed.	Unpersuasive papers play fast and loose with evidence and/or fail to analyze the evidence sufficiently, i.e., connect it to the claim.	Prompt the writer to re-examine both claims and evidence by asking: Where's the evidence to support each claim? How do you account for counter-evidence? How can you analyze the evidence so that the reader sees what you see?
<b>The Hard-to-Read Paper</b>	Usually exhibits the symptoms of one or more of the above paper types, but also has hard-to-read sentences, often either highly abstract or simplistic.	Conceptual problems are compounded by problems with style and audience. The contorted writers believe that academic writing is inflated; the simplistic writers have little experience writing in an academic context.	Ask the contorted writers to listen to their draft aloud and work to make written sentences as clear as spoken ones. Help the simplistic writers pattern their sentences after good models.

## On Tutoring ESL Students

An exciting resource at the Beren Writing Center is the addition of an ESL specialist to our tutoring staff. If you believe a student would benefit from ESL-specific tutoring, guide her in accessing the ESL schedule that is available via the drop-down box on our main scheduling page.

### **Practical Matters**

It is a good idea in any tutoring situation to ask your client a few questions before getting started. Particularly with an ESL student, it is important to find out where the client is from, what is her first language, and how long she has been speaking English.

When you begin looking together at the client's writing, respond first to the content, organization, argument, and relevance to the instructor's assignment. It is unproductive to work first with grammatical errors in sentences that might disappear once the student better understands the conventions of argument. Pay special attention to what the students want to say in their writing. It is acceptable to challenge them and ask them questions to strengthen their argument, but avoid taking over the argument. Sometimes ESL language barriers make the client reluctant to express herself and her intended meaning, and cultural differences might incline the student to abandon her own ideas and defer to you as an authority figure. It is important that the ESL writer learn to value her writing as an expression of her own ideas—it will make writing more fun, and will encourage her to work through the more strenuous tasks of writing and revision to gain the satisfaction of successful personal expression.

Encourage your students to paraphrase what they want to say in each paragraph. Sometimes ESL students' argument styles might not match up with English argument styles, and paraphrasing each part of the argument is one useful way to help your clients re-shape their writing into the conventions of English. Ask questions that will help you understand areas that are unclear. This technique will help you work with the student and will help her to formulate her own ideas clearly.

When working with errors and ESL students, take little steps. You will be unable to teach the student to fix everything at once, and overwhelming her with too much explanation at once can make her feel even less comfortable with her writing. Try to identify the student's patterns of error, and work on teaching the student how to correct herself one error at the time. For instance, if you are working with a Russian student, you might notice that she makes mistakes with articles, pronouns, and sentence boundaries. Instead of attempting to "fix" all of these mistakes in her paper, work on one type of problem at a time. Even if you never get to all of her common errors, you will give her an invaluable skill if you teach her how to correct even one of them for herself.

Try to avoid frustration. You may feel that you are accomplishing little in an individual session with an ESL student, but you will see the effects of your work over time. ESL students often make large leaps in the course of a semester, but individual sessions might feel frustrating. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed by the number of errors in a particular essay, remind yourself of your job as a tutor: we are here to make better writers, not better essays. It isn't our job to make each essay perfect, but to see the bigger picture—we want our clients to be able to write well without our assistance.

It may be necessary to repeat yourself often. Try to speak clearly and slowly—students may nod their heads and appear to understand you even when they do not because asking questions is impolite in their culture. If you are not an experienced grammarian, don't worry. You are all good speakers and writers of English, and you can help your ESL students immensely just by modeling good speaking and writing. If you don't know the answer to one of their questions about certain grammar or syntactical conventions, try to help them look it up. English grammar can be illogical and difficult to explain, but working with ESL students will help you become more fluent in your explanations.

If you are working in a small-group situation with ESL students, encourage the students to talk to one another in English. Try to maximize your resources as a teacher. ESL students need practice listening and speaking, reading and writing. Encourage them to try to help each other as much or more than you are helping them. As you have probably learned from your own experiences as a tutor, explaining a concept to others helps you to solidify that concept for your own mind. Peer group tutoring is an extremely effective way to work with ESL students because it helps them to take more responsibility for their own development as writers.

Don't hesitate to ask for help from other tutors or the directors. If you have a difficult situation with an ESL student, or any student, sometimes just bouncing the problem off of someone else will help you figure out creative solutions. You will learn more about being an effective communicator and a resourceful teacher by working with ESL students than in any other tutoring situation.

## **Theory**

When working with ESL students, two of the most important issues for tutors to remember are contrastive rhetorical strategies and patterns of error. By focusing on these two key points, you can maximize your effectiveness in ESL sessions.

“Contrastive rhetorical strategies” are different ways people construct their arguments in different cultures. Each language offers its speakers particular conventions of thinking, speaking, and writing, which are often different from speakers of other languages. People from different cultures are likely to have very different views of time, physical contact, conventions of reading, gender, culture, alphabets, and whether tones make a difference in the meaning of the words one says.

The implications of an awareness of contrastive rhetorical strategies in a writing tutorial are varied. It is important to understand that a paper, which seems rambling, disorganized, and confusing, might be following the rhetorical strategy of the student's first language. Explain to the student that English writing is very direct and that our style of argumentation might be more straightforward than in other languages.

Plagiarism is another issue that might be important to explain to your students using the model of contrastive rhetorical strategies. In some cultures, students are encouraged to use the words of famous, well-known writers in order to show how educated they are. In English, however, we consider those words to belong to the writer, so borrowing them without quoting or proper citation is plagiarism. If you suspect a student is plagiarizing, ask her to explain the ideas in the plagiarized section of her essay. If she is unable to explain what the passage means, you can ask her where she found the

information. It is much more comfortable for the student if you explain American ideas about the ownership of information than it is for the professor to accuse her of plagiarism formally.

Another important aspect of working with ESL students is identifying patterns of error. This technique is useful when working with any student, but it is especially important to identify the patterns of error with ESL students. When you look at an ESL paper, you might feel overwhelmed by the number of sentence-level errors you see. It is tempting to begin “editing” the paper for the student at this point because you might feel you will not possibly be able to teach the student how to correct every error. Typically, however, if you take time to compare the errors the student makes, you will find that these errors fit into one or two categories of error. If you are able to identify broad categories of error, you simplify your job as a tutor. You only have to teach the student these few grammatical or rhetorical concepts instead of tackling every problem one by one.

ESL issues are among the most challenging for writing tutors, but working with students whose first language is not English can be one of the most rewarding of tutoring experiences. If you keep these approaches to teaching in mind when you are working with ESL students, you can make the task less daunting.